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## “Who Would Believe What We Have Heard?”: Christian Spirituality and Images from the Passion in Religious Art of New Spain<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The colonial art of New Spain/Mexico provides the viewer with a locus of examination into the robust Christianity that emerged over time out of a native spirituality newly laden with the contours and images from the Old World theology of late medieval/early Catholic Reformation Spain. Franciscan and especially Jesuit missionaries, impelled by a devotional zealotry, championed an apocalyptic vision of hope and suffering that was well suited for artistic expression. Religious art, whether or not patronized by European colonizers, became an instrument for the missionaries to teach and for the native artists to interrogate religious doctrine, and some artists, consciously or not, created their art as a response to that catechesis, a subtle fusion of ancient passion with the dramatic intensity of the new Catholic faith. One array of images in particular, that of the dolorous Passion of the Christ, was especially vibrant in the imaginations of the native artists and in the contemplation of the European missionaries and patrons. The image of the Suffering Servant resonated in the hearts and in the daily lives of the people just as it humbled missionary ardor, and excited a spiritual enthusiasm that forged an art of stunning doctrinal intimacy.

### Keywords

colonial art, Mexico, New Spain, Jesuits, Catholicism, Nahuatl

## I Introduction

Colonial art, particularly religious colonial art, challenges the viewer with a pervasive but often subtle ambivalence that tends to inform its

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<sup>1</sup>) Selected images used only by permission of *Images of Faith and Art from Mexico*, an exhibition of religious art of Mexico from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries presented by the Knights of Columbus, 14 September 2005–14 May 2006, Knights of Columbus Museum, New Haven, CT. Verse in title: Isaiah 53:1 (NAB).

creation and presentation. On one hand, the crafting of some colonial art validates the cultural assumptions and aesthetic values of the occupying power, assumptions and values that might have naturally merged with those of the native civilization, evoking among native artisans and artists creative responses that express either a passionate acceptance of or a dispassionate resignation to colonization. The result then is “native” art that is original, creative, and anxious, diffident and ambiguous, an impatient but tense blending of worlds. On the other hand, some colonial art is the emotional response of indigenous artists to the systematic acculturation and evangelization of their people by a conquering nation: the art then becomes the very purposeful reaction of a disenfranchised community to the deliberate transformation of their aesthetic and cultural sensibilities by the formidable conquerors. Yet whatever the disposition of the colonial art, all *religious* art of a colonized people can be especially provocative since, in order to vanquish a people, an invading force must at some point attempt to dominate, or at least marginalize, the faith traditions of the conquered people because it is the corpus of beliefs and traditional practices that organize and to no small degree codify the collective discernment of the lives of the native people and their world, and articulate the essential signification of existence. Such beliefs are exceedingly forceful, and as they define a people so they sustain that people in the midst of threats, invasions, and dangers. Bodies may be broken and political states may be subjugated, but interior lives offer a resilient resolution that assailing powers are eager to defeat. The artistic creations of the colonized and for the colonized may be commentaries or reflections on the loss of territory, on the loss of political control, or on the reconfiguration of the nation. Yet they are also more complex narratives that may chronicle the calculated transformation of spiritual values, the overt destruction of the local gods, the prescribed transposition of a mythology, and the systematic redefinition of the collective remembrances of a people.

A 2005–6 exhibition of paintings at the Knights of Columbus Museum in New Haven, Connecticut, *Images of Faith and Art from Mexico*, did demand that the viewer attend consciously to the religious narratives from two perspectives: that of the spiritual dispositions of the “native” artists who had created the paintings and that of the colonizing spiritual *ethos* out of which the paintings, consciously or not, had been generated. The exhibition presented nearly fifty works of religious art from colonial Mexico, all by Mexican artists. Nearly all of the paintings had never been publicly displayed in the United States, and most had never even left Mexican

territory.<sup>2</sup> The provenance of the art was distributed from various sites, notably the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City, yet for the most part the art has remained anonymous, the artists not readily identifiable. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the colonizing forces in New Spain employed, if not specifically patronized, the paintings as instruments of spiritual pedagogy during the process of conversion and its aftermath, notably because art had become a more accessible means of elucidating the intricate details of Christian theology to the local congregations; indeed, “even the most rudimentary churches needed religious pictures (because) they were so important to the business of conversion” and to the safeguarding of devotion thereafter.<sup>3</sup> Art, visual narration, would become especially important in the continual endeavors to elucidate the complex Christology of early modern Catholicism. This theological theme, as this paper hopes to demonstrate, was rich in imagery and displayed characteristics derived from both medieval and post-Reformation spirituality, as well as from contemporary perspectives. That the Spanish missionaries, particularly the Franciscan friars and the Jesuits, embraced a form of conversion that included distinct modes of religious instruction as well as enforcement is an evident truth of history. It is important to note, however, that the initiative for conversion was not based simply on prospects of gaining territorial power or exploiting cultural prejudices. Rather, the founders of New Spain perceived the establishment of their colonial dominion to be as much a mandate of divine will as it was a consequence of imperial ambition, and the colonial art herein discussed bears compelling testimony to the impact of that ardent enterprise in its evocation of the necessary instruction of the Christian Gospel, centered on the pious and dynamic imagery of scenes from the Passion of Jesus Christ.

## II Brief Historical Review

The Spanish began their conquest of the vast Aztec Empire in the Americas in 1519, led by the redoubtable Hernan Cortes, who was greeted initially by the native people as the god “Quetzalcoatl,” the anticipated savior from the east.<sup>4</sup> The Nahuatl peoples had for generations endured the

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<sup>2</sup>) See the Introduction to the in-house monograph of the exhibition, *Images of Faith and Art from Mexico*.

<sup>3</sup>) Bailey, *Art of Colonial Latin America* 11.

<sup>4</sup>) See Leon-Portilla, *The Broken Spears* 22–26. It is written in the account that the great

domination of the warlike Aztec aristocracy—a cohort of the Aztec nation that was deeply resented and openly feared—so that for many of the less powerful Nahuatl peoples, the arrival of the Spanish initially seemed propitious, the sign of possible deliverance from the brutal Aztec rulers who numbered among their religious practices the loathsome ritual of human sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> Too soon, however, did the Nahuatl realize their error: the relentless aggression of the Spanish conquerors, their indiscriminate and relentless destruction, subdued even the bellicose Aztecs, and *their* defeat at the hands of the Spanish *conquistadores* led to the eventual submission of the entire Nahuatl civilization.<sup>6</sup> Over time, the physical contact between the native peoples, the Nahuatl Indians, and their Spanish conquerors produced a new community known as *mestizaje*, or “Mexican,” and with the emergence of this new group there was also the natural development of a newly fused culture, a colonial culture that eventually combined the Nahuatl with the Spanish.<sup>7</sup> The physical force and social authority of the conquerors compelled the emerging *mestizaje* population and the other peoples who were also inhabiting the territories—the pure Indian communities, the European refugees and adventurers, and Africans who had fled slavery from various ports, islands, and colonies in the north—not only to submit but also to adapt their own religious traditions and patterns of religious expression to the faith of the Spanish vanquishers: the native peoples had to make the ardent Spanish Catholicism of the Renaissance and Counter-Reformation their own.<sup>8</sup>

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Motecuhzoma himself, upon hearing of the arrival of Cortes and his galleons, thought to himself: “He has appeared! He has come back! He will come here, to the place of his throne and canopy, for that is what he promised when he departed!” (23).

<sup>5</sup> Rodriguez 2–3. It is important also to note that decades later, local theologians like Miguel Sanchez (d. 1671) would claim that the Aztecs had been “Satan’s elect” because their actions clearly demonstrated that they had fallen away from God’s grace and had acted at the behest of Satan. See Canizares-Esguerra 420–37, especially 429–30.

<sup>6</sup> In little more than a century, the indigenous population of New Spain had tragically decreased from at least five million in 1519 to no more than one-and-a-half million by 1650. Such significant population decline has been attributed to foreign diseases and bacteria as much as to the use of violence and harsh enslavement of the Nahuatl by the Spanish. See Rodriguez 3.

<sup>7</sup> Eventually, racial stratification became systematized in the society of New Spain, with the pure Nahuatl (“Indian”) reduced to the lowest social position, followed (in ascending order) by the *mestizaje* (mixed Nahuatl and Spanish), the “criollo” (New World Spanish/Indian), and, at the coveted highest ranking of society, the European-born “pure” Spanish. See Rodriguez 65.

<sup>8</sup> Pardo presents a thorough and thoughtful study of the theological dimensions of the religious conquest of the Nahuatl people by their Spanish conquerors.

The conversion, however, proved to be a daunting process because the pre-conquest religious life of the native peoples was robust in all aspects of piety and devotional expression: calendric ritual observances, bounteous religious art and sacred architecture, an established priesthood, an abundant pantheon of deities, and collections of mythographic and cosmographic narratives.<sup>9</sup> The Spanish encountered in the Nahuatl a people who already inhabited a densely spiritual world and who so realized sacredness and sacred power everywhere in the temporal realm that they practiced rituals throughout the year to regulate and appease the sacred power.<sup>10</sup> The reality of a transcendent presence in human experience motivated the people to engage that transcendent force in their daily lives. As the *tlamatinime*, or wise men, explained to missionary friars,

there is life because of the gods;  
 with their sacrifice, they gave us life...  
 they [the gods] provide our subsistence,  
 all that we eat and drink,  
 that which maintains life: corn, beans,  
 amaranth, sage...  
 courage and the ability to rule  
 they gave to the people...  
 We know  
 on Whom life is dependent;  
 on Whom the perpetuation of the race depends...  
 how it is that one must invoke,  
 how it is that one must pray. (Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 64–66)

The differences between the European Catholicism that arrived on the shores of the new world in the sixteenth century and the native polytheistic traditions of earth and weather gods in the lands of the Americas were, of course, significant and, when expressed publicly within a community, quite apparent. Nevertheless, there was a recognizable predilection in the devotional expressions of the Nahuatl that allowed them to realize similar traditions of piety and belief in the Christianity that washed ashore from

<sup>9</sup>) For more complete details, see Nicholson.

<sup>10</sup>) One of their wise men had explained to a group of missionary Franciscan friars that generations taught succeeding generations the ways of respect and reverence for the gods with the song: “Before them, do we prostrate ourselves; / in their names we bleed ourselves; / our oaths we keep, / incense we burn, / and sacrifices we offer” (Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 64).

Spanish galleons. So, for example, the Nahuatl predicated human existence upon the notion of a divine *sacrifice* that had allowed humankind to endure (“There is life because of the gods; / with their sacrifice they gave us life”), and while the Nahuatl hermeneutic of “life” was of something more material than abstract, still the indigenous narrative suggests that the relationship between the gods and humanity was proximate and significant enough to the deities for them to humble themselves, essentially for the sake of humanity, to the point of divine sacrifice. This account obviously resonated with the Christian narrative of the Christ.<sup>11</sup> The Nahuatl also conceded that the relationship between the divine and the sacred is lasting, interdependent and dynamic (“We know / on whom life is dependent; / on whom the perpetuation of the race depends”) and thus every individual must negotiate that relationship with deferential propitiation (“[we know] how it is that one must invoke / how it is that one must pray”) and true humility. Thus, while there were profound distinctions between the faiths of the conqueror and of the conquered, clearly the religious traditions and the religious orientation of the Nahuatl were nonetheless so predisposed to an authentic spirituality that the European religion of the conquerors and the missionaries, while distinct in style and content, would not have seemed so alien that the new religion could not take firm and permanent root in the consciousness of the peoples of New Spain.

The conscious brutality of the Spanish conquest of the Americas is a familiar detail of the historical record, yet the *entire* frame of reference of the audacious *conquistadores*, who had traveled across the great expanse of sea at the behest of their king, might suggest a more appropriate—yet not exculpatory—context in which to regard the occupation. The Spanish crown in the sixteenth century considered its expedition to the New World and its eventual conquest of those lands not only as an adventurous effort for the discovery of land and of unknown resources and, therefore, of other realms to dominate but also as a providential act, a pious undertaking that God himself had ordained.<sup>12</sup> The Spanish, as one Benedictine abbot wrote,

<sup>11</sup> Nicholson offers greater detail of Nahuatl mythology and recounts the Nahuatl myths of the gods laboring to revive the universe after a period of destruction and death, producing fire in order that man might one day sustain himself, and finally performing auto-sacrifice, during which they dripped their blood onto a mass of broken bone fragments, which four days later generated the human male, and four days after this, the human female. See Nicholson, especially 399–400, for other mythic tales and religious stories.

<sup>12</sup> Thus, the instruction given even to Cortes was that religious conquest must accompany military conquest since he was to “neglect no opportunity to spread the knowledge of the True Faith and the Church of God among those people who dwell in darkness” (Ricard 16).

had proved themselves to be God's "favorite," the new "chosen" people of Christianity who had never betrayed their faith, not even during the "Moorish occupation" (Juan de Salazar, qtd. in Brading 33). They had demonstrated the mettle of their religious convictions by overthrowing the Muslim rule of Spain in 1492; thereafter, their Victorious Majesties Ferdinand and Isabella demonstrated their exquisite devotion by dedicating the nation of Spain to the Immaculate Conception of Mary. By the sixteenth century, the Catholic throne of Spain was assuming as well a vigorous leadership in the European conflict between the efforts of the established Catholic kingdoms and the emerging Protestant nations to win over the hearts, minds, and treasures of the common people (Brading 4–5). The Spanish crown, as well as the rest of Catholic Europe, regarded Spain's religious conquests and extensive conversion of native peoples to Catholicism in the New World not only as acts of righteous obedience to God but also as the justifiable recompense for the souls lost to the zeal of the Reformed dissenters. Members of monastic orders—Franciscans in the north and the Yucatan, Dominicans in the southeast, Augustinians in the northwest, and eventually Jesuits throughout and especially in the far northeast—each with its own particular charism, flocked to New Spain in order to minister to and convert "out of darkness" the native populations, establishing (as they perceived it) a distinctive version of the "primitive church" in the New World. Indeed, the missionaries and their respective temporal governments, as well as the ecclesial authorities in Europe, conceived the formation of a New World Church as a counterpoint to the fractured condition of the Old World *Ecclesia* of Europe.

The sixteenth-century Church, and especially the religious authority in Spain, perceived the age as one of potent spiritual possibilities and as a critical moment in the continuing life of the Church, possibly on the brink of the Final Judgment. The Franciscans initially and later the Jesuits came to understand their missionary work as not only exemplary (they sought to introduce the Christ of the Gospel throughout the world by living in the perfect love and simplicity of Jesus) but also as essential (they worked to spread the teachings of Jesus in order to assist in universal salvation).<sup>13</sup> The Franciscans were committed to missionary work, and they brought to New Spain their vigorous trust in the significance of penitential acts and in the efficacy of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, since they regarded these pious conditions—the effort to repent and the belief in visible acts of invisible grace—as indispensable to both the newly-converted and

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<sup>13</sup>) Daniel 35–38. See also Phelan 69–77 and Bireley 148–59 *passim*.



traditional practitioners in their efforts to live lives in more complete imitation of the Savior.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the founder of the Jesuits, the Basque aristocrat Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), articulated the dynamic aspects of the charism of the Society of Jesus as the exuberant assertion of pre-Reformation, quite medieval liturgical and devotional practices, and the sure affirmation of the essential goodness of creation and the inherent worthiness of human nature. Moreover, at the core of Jesuit spirituality was the belief that that the created world, and the things of the created world, could evidence not merely God's will but a "dimension" of God himself—a dimension of God knowable within the temporal, human realm.<sup>15</sup> Thereupon, as Jesuits forged their missionary path through the New World, they expanded their programs of evangelization and conversion with such enhancements as the continual inclusion of local, familiar ritual behaviors, the frequent use of religious media like holy water, and the common display of devotional objects like crucifixes, along with the traditional forms of catechesis. However, not the least influential medium of doctrinal instruction was pictorial art and other physical imagery, the visual instruments of spiritual illumination.

### III Missionary Instruction and the Iconic Image

The prominent voices of the Reformation had loudly denounced the religious art and ecclesial iconography of Catholicism.<sup>16</sup> Just as Protestantism was acknowledged to be the religion of the text, the word, and literalism, so the Council of Trent (1545–1563) identified Catholicism as the religion of imagery, ritual, and allegory.<sup>17</sup> The sacramental consciousness of Cathol-

<sup>14</sup> It is worth mentioning that the frequency of the reception of the Eucharist became a volatile topic for the Spanish Inquisition, especially since Franciscans and Dominicans in Italy and Spain as well as in New Spain were encouraging frequent reception of the Eucharist as one of the most important devotional practices for all the faithful. The inquisitors were suspicious that increased reception of the sacrament could lead to a sense of spiritual pride. See Pardo 152–54.

<sup>15</sup> Ignatius writes: "God labors and works for [us] in all the creatures on the face of the earth... [H]e is working in the heavens, elements, plants, fruits, cattle, and all the rest—giving them their existence, conserving them... all good things and gifts descend from above; for example, [our] limited power from the Supreme and Infinite Power above" (177).

<sup>16</sup> Miles 99. See also Hibbard 29–30.

<sup>17</sup> As stated by the Council: "The images of Christ, of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the other saints, are to be had and retained particularly in temples, and... due honor and

icism allowed the physical, the material, to be transformative but also to be transformable: by the grace of God, a manufactured item or a physical object could offer tangible testimony to the presence of the sacred, a visual implication of what human vision could never truly see. The Jesuits were especially sensitive to the potential of the material in religious matters. As noted above, Ignatius de Loyola had affirmed many of the devotional practices and much of the spiritual iconography of the medieval Church as essential to the preservation of post-Reformation Catholicism. Spiritual disciplines and holy images, Ignatius reflected, would encourage believers to abide actively and constructively in their faith, a faith that the Jesuits presented as distinctly intellectual yet also experiential, symbolic, dynamic, performative, and communitarian. The Jesuit order became known not only for its devotional richness and rigorous scholarship but also for its enthusiastic art and architecture (especially churches), for its resolute insistence on magnified size for the sites of worship in order to accommodate as many of the faithful as possible, for its use of religious artifacts and holy relics, and for its fervent espousal of spiritual practices like pilgrimages and the reception of sacraments.<sup>18</sup> Ignatius was not merely parroting traditional devotions and complying with ecclesiastical demands in the instruction of these spiritual disciplines; in fact, one of the primary intentions in his

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veneration are to be given them; not that any divinity, or virtue, is believed to be in them, on account of which they are to be worshipped; or that anything is to be asked of them; or, that trust is to be reposed in images... but because the honor which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which those images represent... [B]y means of the histories of the mysteries of our Redemption, portrayed by paintings or other representations, the people is instructed, and confirmed in [the habit of] remembering, and continually revolving in mind the articles of faith; as also that great profit is derived from all sacred images, not only because the people are thereby admonished... but also because the miracles which God has performed by means of the saints, and their salutary examples, are set before the eyes of the faithful; that so they may give God thanks for those things; may order their own lives and manners in imitation of the saints; and may be excited to adore and love God, and to cultivate piety" (*Canons and Decrees* 234–35).

<sup>18</sup>) Again, in *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius writes that the Society should minister in such a way as to encourage "confession to a priest, reception of the most blessed Sacrament... every week... [The Society should laud] frequent attendance at Mass, also chants, psalmody, and long prayers... [and] relics of saints, by venerating the relics and praying to saints. [The Society] should extol visits to stational churches, pilgrimages... and the lighting of candles in churches... [and] should praise precepts of fast and abstinence... also penances... [The Society should praise] the ornamentation and structures of churches; also images, and their veneration according to what they represent" (211–12). See also O'Malley, "Early Jesuit Spirituality" 8–9.

founding of the Society was to effect the means to bring the common faithful into a viable relation with the holy, to forge a significant bond between God and the faithful who were yet immersed in the temporal world, and to allow the material to become a potential medium for the spiritual. For the Society, then, learning—and therefore teaching others—to decipher the intricacies of divine creation was an effective aspect of devotion, as were the efforts by Jesuits and by the curricula of Jesuit education to replicate details of creation and figures of devotion in image and in other artistic forms. The Ignatian paradigm rested on both a secure trust in the inherent capacity and the assumed propriety of humans to learn and to gain knowledge, and on a resolute conviction that a proper catechesis for the faithful need not always be textual. Indeed, “The Jesuits envisioned art as the visual equivalent to sacred oratory . . . [because] art had an extraordinary ability ‘to delight, to teach, and to move’” and so could affect every person, regardless of education, economic background, or place of origin; moreover, devotional art was a useful instrument “for surmounting the language barrier—a vital tool for a society committed to overseas missions.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, it is not at all remarkable that the Jesuits, and to a lesser degree the Franciscans, should have incorporated images, performances, and objects into the programs of religious education and as implements of religious conversion in Europe and especially beyond the traditional boundaries of Europe, in New Spain. When the Jesuits arrived in New Spain in 1572, they brought with them a predilection for the symbolic and experiential, and they soon realized that the native population also deeply appreciated the illustrative and the ceremonial aspects of piety.

#### **IV Studies of the Passion in Late Medieval and Early Modern Art**

One theme of devotional imagery that became increasingly dominant throughout the later medieval period and into the era of the early modern Church (in both the Old and New Worlds) was the tableau of the Passion of Jesus Christ. It is important to note that constant adoration and pious representation of the Passion “far outran strict liturgical necessity” during the late medieval and early modern eras, as the dynamic interaction of the

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<sup>19</sup> Bailey, *Art on the Jesuit Missions* 8. See also his article, “‘Le style jesuite n’existe pas’” 38–39 for an extraordinary catalogue of Jesuit art and theory as well as a considered riposte to common critiques of the artistic enterprise of the Society of Jesus.

faithful multitudes with the diverse modalities of piety emerging from both within and without ecclesial authority inspired and continued to sustain religious zeal (Kieckhefer 83). The distinctive aspects of transition in the religious ethos of the later generation of the Middle Ages, aspects that would define early modern European religious culture, are well-known: the reorientation of ritual emphasis from the collective to the personal, from the primarily exterior to the inclusively interior; the broadening of personal piety from the overwhelmingly didactic to include the richly affective; a conversion of the primary locus in liturgy and other forms of worship from the global to the local as communities of the faithful revised and adapted the symbols and lexicons of the universal church to their own relevance and use.<sup>20</sup> Such changes in quotidian devotion were signifiers of broader cultural adjustments that were occurring in the societies of western Europe in the late medieval and early modern eras, and one of the more critical shifts in Christian spirituality was related to the amplified focus—socially, philosophically, artistically—on the temporal, the human, and the individual. Thus, the new inflection in Christology was of a more intimate, more private, and more introspective witness of Jesus the man, Jesus as fully human as he was fully divine. The mortal dimension of the life of Jesus became a frequent subject for representation and examination, so that, by way of examples, the representations of the Nativity became more prevalent in ecclesial settings, and images of Jesus as an infant or child with his parents or elders, or as an adult conferring with his apostles or moving among the crowds who followed him became more and more a focus of discussion and study (Luria 116–17). Yet no images specific to the humanity of Jesus were more the object of worship and adoration than those associated with the series of events collectively known as the Passion, for it was during that time, during those moments, when Jesus was believed to have been at his most loving, his most physically distressed, his most merciful, and his most human. The Passion, of course, articulated both the humble divinity that so loved the world as to render itself helpless and suffer excruciatingly in the temporal realm and the profound humanity that, enduring the torturous burden of mortal frailty, enabled Jesus to empathize with and understand the humanity he had come to redeem. It was during the Passion, the faithful believed, that Jesus had experienced his

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<sup>20</sup> So, for example, the ritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, a costly and arduous undertaking for even the wealthiest and hardiest of the faithful, became personalized and localized as the stations of the cross in the home church.

human condition most powerfully, and thus, in the mystery of his suffering, had validated then and for all time the awful significance of human life.

The emphasis on the humanity of Christ also persisted in the intense Christocentric devotional practices of the early modern Church, and the particular fidelity to the suffering of Jesus in an increasingly interiorized and personalized Christianity further embellished this emphasis. The mystical spirituality emerging from Catholic countries like Spain expressly urged sincere believers to reflect deeply on the significance and consequence of the afflicted humanity, as well as on the miraculous divinity, of Jesus. The impassioned Spanish mystic and spiritual director, Francisco de Osuna (d.c. 1540), whose influence was so profound on the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spanish friars and Jesuits who made their way to New Spain, wrote that

as Christ has two natures, so there are two ways of following him... [O]ur exterior person... is born to labor and run after Christ in the ways described: following him in hardship and penitence and poverty in all things. But our soul with its superior part is a very swift bird, born to fly to divinity... [I]t seems very wrong to want your soul to follow Christ's Divinity if your body refuses to follow his Humanity. The one is the foundation for the other. (415)

The Christian, then, to experience Christ completely and authentically, cannot seek refuge simply in the still tranquility of his divinity; rather, one must also recognize and realize his humanity in all of its contours, for, as Osuna suggests, divinity is finally unknowable without first or additionally understanding humanity. Christ cannot be “known,” nor can human affiliation with Jesus occur, only in thoughtful meditation, abstract reflection, or even sincere prayer, although such devotions are indeed necessary.<sup>21</sup> Osuna suggests that humans were in fact born with bodies, the “exterior” selves, in order to endure bodily trials like those of Jesus, so that the soul, otherwise so light and airy as to fly “to divinity,” might come to know itself and realize the magnificent grace of the divine sacrifice and ultimate salvation. Indeed, the narrative of the Passion is at the heart of the theological and spiritual training of scholastics in the Society of Jesus, as Ignatius of Loyola deliberately crafted his *Spiritual Exercises* to culminate in a week-

<sup>21</sup>) On devotional practices and the way of the exterior/interior worship of Christ with a focus on the Passion, see Kavanaugh 71–72 and Haliczzer 213–17.

long, systematic contemplation of the Passion. In his writings, Ignatius asserted that only through a deep reflection on the events of the Passion that brought about the miraculous act of redemption can one truly partake of the mystery of the Christian faith (168–71). It is understandable, then, that the Jesuits, so devoted to the Passion cycle and so committed to material as well as intellectual expression in their missionary work, would be diligent to offer artistic renditions of scenes from the Passion for public display and private mediation among communities in their missions throughout the world.

## V The Paintings: Three Scenes from the Passion of Christ

Many art historians have long been loathe to ascribe to the colonial art of New Spain the traditional labels of distinct European “styles” since the art of Mexico and other Latin American nations seems to be characterized by a “chronological anarchy” that defies all usual prescriptions of color, form, content, perspective, and design conforming to a single artistic type.<sup>22</sup> The fluid merging and intermingling of styles and technique as one cultural authority impinged upon another, the delayed effect on creative sensibilities as artistic ideas weathered the rigorous crossing of the Atlantic to the New World, and the noted predilection of the colonized populations of New Spain for imaginative expression forged artistic production that was both familiar and yet distinctive, traditional perhaps to the point of seeming derivative and yet ineffably spontaneous, possibly unremarkable in content and form and yet remarkable in its vigor and independence. Thus, the first two paintings discussed below, the *Prayer in the Garden* and *Jesus of Nazareth* (fig. 1), exemplify the schematic structure and tonality of “tenebrist naturalism,” the deliberate manipulation of illumination and shadow to unify space, articulate imagery, and subvert observation, an artistic style that was already a generation past in Europe.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, each piece displays an essential ardor, a joyous engagement of theme and technique, as if in the “old” styles being transported to the New World, the colonial artist had discovered the most opportune resources to express his emotional piety and glad devotion.

<sup>22</sup>) Bailey, *Art of Colonial Latin America* 16 and *Art on Jesuit Missions* 22–25. A brief allusion to syncretism can be found in Toussaint 225.

<sup>23</sup>) On distinct styles including “tenebrist naturalism” in colonial art, see Burke 29–31. For commentary on the European school, see Minor 164–68.

One of the more poignant works from the collection is the anonymous *Prayer in the Garden*, a masterpiece from New Spain that invites the viewer into a most intimate moment in the life of Jesus at the start of his Passion. The painting is tender, evocative, emotional, and more psychological than merely descriptive or literal, and yet the *Garden* confronts the viewer with a scene that, despite its evident simplicity of narrative, actually presents a rather elaborate Christology. The setting of the painting is, of course, the evening scene in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus, having anguished over what he knows must happen that evening and the next day, has “emptied” himself of his will and his divinity, and so has finally accepted the “cup” of his own sacrifice that he was born to accept as a gracious bequest to humanity. The scriptural passage that was the inspiration of the image would have been familiar (at least aurally) to most viewers of the painting: after Jesus and his disciples had finished their Passover meal, during which Jesus had instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist with the apostles by offering his body and blood in the form of bread and wine at the seder table, they retired to the cool solitude of a nearby garden.

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; “and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.<sup>24</sup>

The anonymous artist of the *Garden* has aptly rendered the distressed Jesus, alone, now deserted by his neglectful disciples who fell asleep after their meal and were in fact asleep to a dynamic commitment to discipleship. Interestingly, the structure of space in the image is so constricted and compact that the frame of the picture includes only the images of the two who were awake—literally, and to what will soon transpire—at that critical moment. The composition of the painting focuses the viewer on its inte-

<sup>24</sup>) Luke 22:39–45. Critical scriptural passages such as this would have been heard in churches by congregants, certainly by the early seventeenth century; moreover, both the Franciscans and especially the Jesuits conducted their missionary work in the language native to their new converts, in this case, usually Nahuatl. See Pardo 108–15.

rior, which is easily defined by its circular movement. The viewer's gaze is drawn first to Jesus' hands, clasped in invocation, that then direct the eye to his mournful face, the upturned eyes of which in turn carry the viewer over to the benign face of an angel, blonde and pale, smiling ever so slightly. The angel's lowered gaze at the disconsolate Jesus leads the observer to look upon the angel's right hand that is motioning in benediction to Jesus to attend to the chalice in the angelic left hand, the arm of which sweeps back up to the face of the Christ. The viewer is seduced by the dynamic iconism of the painting, its minimally figural and yet theologically complex narrative, and the centralized focus of the representation, characteristics that were hallmarks of Jesuit artistry. One recognizes here the medieval sensibility brought into the early modern era: the (material) image will delimit the final inadequacy of language and provide a locus for the unutterable transcendence, majesty, and mystery of the Divine.<sup>25</sup> The artist has portrayed Jesus as a slim, almost fragile man with dark hair and eyes, an aquiline nose, and an oval face of Latin, possibly Mexican origin, so that the local *mestizaje* might see himself mirrored in the portrait.<sup>26</sup> However, the look that the suffering Jesus manifests would be familiar to anyone. Here is the picture of a despairing man in an evening meditation, tired and slightly confused and, for the moment, desperately seeking relief. Any congregant, regardless of economic or educational background, would have been able to sympathize, if not empathize, with the frail human seemingly overwhelmed by a darkening shroud of despair. Who is there who has not had to receive the "cup," accept the consequence of an inevitable action, realize ache and affliction? Yet the angel heralds the light in the darkness, illumination glowing from the invisible "above"; Jesus seems to be leaning into the angel, head slightly bowed, an image of human weakness resting against ethereal strength, and the angel does appear to lean forward toward Jesus, as if to offer support. The luminosity also appears to emanate from within the embrace of the two figures as Jesus sits in shadow, only his upper torso visible, light radiating all about and above himself and the angel. The scene is so personal, even confidential, that the viewer feels as if he or she is almost an intrusive observer, or the beneficiary of an unexpected act of

<sup>25</sup> On the elements that defined the style of Jesuit artistry especially for missionary work, see Bailey, *Art on Jesuit Missions* 193–94.

<sup>26</sup> The Jesuits, more than any other order, created and commissioned art—paintings, architecture, sculpture—especially in New Spain, and were quite at ease with assigning native or non-European artists to the tasks of producing religious art. See Bailey, *Art on Jesuit Missions*, especially 44–51.



grace, to look upon so tender and yet so courageous a moment. Jesus sweats drops of blood, and the angel, while kindly, is also resolute in the necessary accomplishment of the divine design: the angel's face is not impassive and the angel holds the cup/chalice firmly, upright. Even if the ordinary worshipper did not know the scriptural passage of which the painting is a representation, the image, provocative and explicit and yet laden with symbolism, is as instructive as it is inspirational. The ordinary worshipper would likely have recognized the chalice/cup that the angel holds as the chalice used at every Mass, the cup of suffering that is the chalice of the Eucharist, the chalice of the body and the blood of Christ, the cup of the death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> It is a vessel of mortal death but also eternal life, the cup of eternal redemption for all humanity. Thus, the artist has conflated (and properly so!) the scene in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus delivered himself over as a sacrifice with the Eucharistic celebration of the bread and wine transformed into the Body and Blood when the congregant experiences the daily sacrament of the perpetual sacrifice. For the average worshipper, the language describing and explicating the fundamental signification of that glorious sacrifice might not be readily available, but the artistic image provides every average worshipper with a perpetual medium for private contemplation on the divine mystery of the Christian faith.

As the anonymous *Garden* painting impresses upon the viewer the quite human agony that Christ endured for love and the need to regard human suffering in the context of the divine sacrifice, so also does another painting presented at the exhibition, *Jesus of Nazareth / Jesus Takes Up His Cross* from the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City.

It is a haunting portrait of Jesus at another familiar moment in his Passion: Jesus on the road to his own crucifixion, bearing his cross, alone along a seemingly empty landscape, far from human contact or comfort. It is a painting bathed in shadow and opaque hues, yet in its excruciating simplicity it is also one of the more provocative images of Jesus as the solitary Suffering Servant, the fragility of his body emphasized by the weight and

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<sup>27</sup> The history of the reception of the Eucharist in New Spain is complex and varied, but the Society of Jesus "had long promoted frequent Communion among its brothers and among the laity" and thus Eucharistic devotion became one of the more salient features in Jesuit spirituality, especially into the seventeenth century. Franciscans also promoted the idea of frequent and universal communion, as was recommended by the great Franciscan Francisco de Osuna. See Pardo 151–54.



*Figure 1.* Anonymous. *Jesus of Nazareth / Jesus Takes Up His Cross*, seventeenth century. Metropolitan Cathedral, Mexico City, Mexico. Photo: Knights of Columbus Supreme Council.

size of the wooden cross he must bear, his torment by the rope tied about his neck. The brown earth tones in the foreground of the painting remind the viewer of the onerous mortality of Jesus at this time, placing him in the temporal dimension on a road of sere aridity not unlike many roads in the drier regions of New Spain (or the Middle East). The earthen hues also provide an immediate contrast to the bloodied face and hands of Jesus, which are softly illumined by a pale glow that seems to have its source from behind and above the darkened form. The occasion is rendered starkly visible and one cannot look away from the fact of this holy sacrifice. Any intimation of human society takes the form of some few vague, inhospitable buildings representing Jerusalem (or settlements of New Spain) in the far distance. Visible behind the edifices are the mountainous expanses outside the walls of Jerusalem (or the mountainous terrain in the northern areas of New Spain) which, although illuminated, seem similarly austere, harsh, and uninviting. Both the distinct habitations and the radiant topography seem quite removed from the very emotive human drama being enacted in the forefront of the painting, and indeed, the immediacy of the image is breathtaking: Jesus looks out imploringly from the painting, making direct eye contact with each viewer and thus transforming the ordinary observer into a unambiguous witness to the torturous journey to Calvary and the Crucifixion. The contemporary believer looking at the painting is deftly and deliberately incorporated into the event—is the stare accusatory, making viewers complicit with the condemners of Christ, or is it melancholy, merging viewers with the grieving multitudes for whom the figure in the painting sacrificed/is sacrificing/will sacrifice himself?—and so experiences the Passion, certainly the Way of Sorrows, as an event out of time, devoid of temporal boundaries, present, eternal, occurring daily, within the material realm. The face in the painting is obviously meant to represent Jesus; however, the face just as easily could be that of a friar (note the Franciscan implications of the attire) or a local worshipper, and thus, like a mirror, the faithful look at and into the painting, seeing reflected back their own sorrows, crosses to bear, and lonely paths to travel. In this respect, the painting truly evokes the transition from medieval to early modern sensibilities, for the representation is focused not on variables of imagery, as was more prevalent in the late medieval era, but rather upon a highly personal, even intimate, singular encounter with a limited theme, here the sacred, devoid of all unnecessary externals and centered on a specific form. Each individual gazing upon the painting is able to experience the road to Calvary privately, personally, uniquely, so that even for those lacking a

clear understanding of the mysteries of the Passion or of the meaning of the divine sacrifice, they can look upon the face of Jesus, who returns the gaze, and discover a domain of recognition and understanding. It should not be surprising that the Passion was so evocative for the Christians of New Spain since in the villages among the native populations, from the time of the initial conversions in the sixteenth century, demonstrations of scenes from the Passion—and by the seventeenth century evolving “Passion plays”—had become more and more popular and skillfully presented. Indeed, increasingly as the time for dramatic presentations grew closer, “a special rhythm punctuated the local life of the indigenous peoples, and the preparations [of the local Passion plays] went on late into the village night” (Gruzinski 154). The cultic narrative of the sacrificial god, whose human ordeal and mortal agony led to an actual physical death, and the iconographic dimension of the events of the Passion that telescoped the sacred into the ordinary by the use of human form and scale allowed the Nahuatl and the Mexican peoples to privilege their own experiences of anguish as the encounter of Jesus Christ and to comprehend in a tangible, even visceral, form within time the timeless event of salvation.

The final representation of a Passion scene is *The Pieta* by the famous native Mexican painter Juan Correa (fig. 2). While this painting lacks the emotional intimacy expressed by the *Garden*, or even *Jesus Takes Up His Cross*, it nonetheless directly addresses another dimension—and part of the final act—of Christ’s Passion, that of the lament of Mary cradling the limp body of her dead son Jesus in her lap after his deposition from the cross. It is a profoundly human scene (what mother, witnessing the terrible death of her son, her child, would not similarly grieve and appear similarly distraught?), and perhaps even more than the *Garden*, it is a reminder of Jesus’ utter humanity, his incarnate frailty and mortality. Correa’s painting does not express singular Marian imagery, for the figure of Mary in particular is rather generic, that of a sorrowing woman enfolding the corpse of her son in her robes, Mary the mother of Jesus at the foot of the cross.<sup>28</sup> As she is Mary, she is also Every Mother, who in her deep anguish is united to humanity in full comprehension of the human condition, its fleeting joys and its doleful sorrows, its bitter mortality. Her expression is a poignant combination of shock, lament, amazement, even bereaved acceptance, as

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<sup>28</sup>) The influence of the Jesuits can be discerned in most Marian imagery, but especially in any representation of the Virgin of Sorrows, an iconography particularly associated with the Society of Jesus. See Bargellini 680–98 passim.





Figure 2. Juan Correa. *The Pieta*, c. late seventeenth century. Knights of Columbus Religious Heritage Art Collection. Photo: Knights of Columbus Supreme Council.

she tearfully looks off to the side, momentarily at a loss as events have unfolded. She sits helpless, not even looking at her son who lies so limp and bloodied, draped across her knees. The octagonal shape of Correa's *Pieta* compliments the triangular focus of the image that begins with the slightly turned head of Mary and proceeds downward to the muscular but limp torso of Jesus whose left arm dangles down toward a rock upon which Mary is resting her foot. It is the image of a youthful, healthy male, emptied of strength and vitality. Just below the rock in the foreground of the painting are visible the material remnants of the Passion that overwhelmed the living vigor in the now still body: the nails and the crown of thorns, bloodied but now discarded, their power and usefulness spent, extinguished.

Those abandoned instruments of torture, of Jesus' agony, lie nearly in shadow, with only a faint glow noting their presence, as if to remind the viewer of the anguished circumstances of the Passion, of the suffering Jesus endured for the sake of humanity. The forms of Jesus and Mary are illuminated from above and behind, an iridescence softening their bodies with a touch of gold, giving them a quality of light that seems eternal, even nurturing, as if the artist were suggesting divine protection, God's watchful solace. The rest of the painted scene is darkened slightly by a somber hue, deadening, like the empty landscape. From the implements of the Passion, the viewer's gaze then moves across the foreground of the painting to the sandaled foot and then kneeling figure of a woman in profile, probably Mary Magdalene, head bare and hair loose, crouching at the feet of the Virgin. Mary Magdalene holds in her hands a foot of Jesus and seems to be staring intently at the puncture wound in the top of the foot, while just below the foot she has placed—a chalice? an ointment jar? It is true that in most Catholic art the Magdalene is symbolized by the ointment jar, yet Correa has allowed for a slight ambiguity and created the jar as a kind of axial point: it represents the Magdalene and foreshadows her obligation the day after this event occurred when she and Mary would go to the tomb to anoint the corpse, as was customary. Thus, the viewer may be called to reflect on the successive events of the Triduum and the final day of Resurrection, when the definitive humanity of Jesus, now overcome, would give way to the eternal divinity of the Christ. However, the jar has also the general shape of a chalice, and as the Magdalene tenderly holds the motionless foot of Jesus, the viewer is prompted also to contemplate the daily sacrament of the Eucharist at Mass: Mary is capturing in a chalice the streaming blood of Christ, the blood of life, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant, a covenant that was sealed by the sacrifice of Jesus and that has redeemed all humanity. Again, for the Jesuits, Eucharistic participation by *all* the faithful, including the newly converted, was at the core of their missionary vocation, and Correa's painting is his reflection on that teaching, expressed by the image of tender intimacy as the gentle Magdalene—the fallen woman who has been redeemed as all humanity is redeemed—devotedly preserves the precious blood in her jar, in the chalice. The chalice rests on dry, barren ground of chalky stone and bare branches awaiting the nourishment of moisture, just as—so the painting seems to instruct—the life-giving blood of the risen Christ offers spiritual nourishment to empty, withered souls, and posits a rebuff to the twisted,

bloodied nails and thorny crown that lie to the other side of the site of the Deposition. Indeed, the emphasis upon the holy blood continues. From the figure of Mary Magdalene, the viewer's gaze is drawn up the leg of Jesus to his full, exposed torso, inert in the arms of his mother. His body is streaked with blood that flows from the wounds on his head, and the wound of the Crucifixion, the puncture from the nail, is still markedly apparent on his left hand that droops listlessly over a bloodied knee. The entire grouping, then, of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Magdalene, creates for the viewer, of both New Spain and now, a densely Christological and Marian meditation, a dynamic reflection on the significance of the Suffering Servant, his Most Precious Blood, the symbology of the sacrament of the Eucharist, and the distinction of feminine devotion.

## **VI In Conclusion, Briefly**

The paintings presented in this paper offer three heretofore commonly unknown works from the religious history of New Spain. These works were created to explore and express the emerging spiritual consciousness of post-conquest New Spain/Mexico, an era and place marked by the effects of the exceptional combination of late medieval Franciscan spirituality and post-Reformation Spanish mystical theology. This robust blending was perhaps best articulated by the theological spirituality of the Society of Jesus, an order that more than any other left its imprint on the artistic expression of missionary Catholicism. The paintings also bear witness to the native adoption of that Catholicism which was becoming more and more cemented in their daily lives and culture. The sacred chronicle of the sorrowful mystery of the Passion of Christ—of the mortal despair of the Suffering Servant—already an object of intense devotion in Spain by the time of the Reformation, found its way to New Spain to become the locus of liturgical and personal devotion as the peoples of New Spain/Mexico became more conscious of the apparent familiarity of the narrative and its compelling meaning for their own lives. The religious colonial art described above, then, is the creative effort of local artists to articulate in the complexity of voices both native and foreign the significant implications for an evolving and expanding faith.

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